

# Literature, Ideology and Japan's Revised Education Law: Kinoshita Junji's *Yuzuru*

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By Takashima Nobuyoshi  
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*Three national newspapers and Nihon Keizai Shimbun headlined the death of playwright and preeminent Shakespeare translator Kinoshita Junji on December 1, 2006. This article considers the fate of his classic play *Yuzuru* (Twilight Crane), once condemned as "one-sided" (or "ideologically biased") and inappropriate as teaching material, only to be resurrected a generation later. The article was published in *Shukan Kinyobi* on December 15, 2006, the same day that the Education Reform Bill passed the Upper House of the Diet.*

Playwright Kinoshita Junji died at age ninety-two. On December 1, the three national newspapers, *Yomiuri*, *Asahi* and *Mainichi*, and the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, as if by prearrangement, reminisced about Kinoshita on the front page of their morning editions. However, they lacked historical perspective on the playwright and one important issue surrounding him. Each of the papers had provided a fairly detailed biography of Kinoshita the previous day in their society page or cultural column. Doubtless, similar commentaries were published in local newspapers throughout the country, suggesting Kinoshita's, and *Yuzuru's*, great influence on postwar culture.





*form, she ascends to heaven. Kinoshita's title Yuzuru refers to the fact that the crane ascends to heaven in the evening.*



Yuzuru forms the libretto of an opera composed by Dan Ikuma

*Yuzuru, a widely circulated adaptation of the original folktale, concerns a man who saves a wounded crane. The crane comes to his house as a woman to repay his kindness. She works late into each night weaving a special cloth, which he sells in the market. She works on one condition: that he does not observe her working. When, overcome with curiosity, he witnesses her at her work in her crane*

European and Japanese performances of Yuzuru  
 What is regrettable is that the majority of these columns, while referring to Kinoshita's masterpiece *Yuzuru*, widely performed as a modern drama and an opera, begin and end by discussing the content of *Yuzuru*. For educators, however, what comes to mind when we hear the title *Yuzuru*, is the fact that the Liberal Democratic Party attacked it as *henko* (one-sided or ideologically biased) when it was included in a public school reading textbook. The attack on the use of the folktale as teaching materials came in successive articles in the LDP's *Jiyu Shimpo* beginning in early 1980. The controversy reached a point at which a major

textbook publisher began preparing to replace it with something else at the company president's order.



The opera *Yuzuru* was performed in Seoul in 2005.

Note: The Jiyu Shimpo text of June 10, 1980 read as follows:

*Yuzuru: This story was presented to third or fourth graders. The famous story is said to have been the departure point for Kinoshita Junji. And soon after the war ended it was staged with Yamamoto Yasue as the lead [the crane]. Playwright Kinoshita graduated from Todai in English literature. He is known as an active leftwing playwright who also writes "modern dramas which are extremely ideological (shisosei) and sectarian (tohasei)." [Emphasis added.]*

*The Japanese Called Otto, one of his plays that portrays Ozaki Hotsumi, who was executed along with Sorge for spying, is well known. Critic Yamamoto Natsuhiko noted with surprise that, "Thanks to Kinoshita, one who betrayed the country (Ozaki) became a patriot after the war."*

*Yuzuru, it is said, is not actually a mere retelling of Tsuru no Ongaishi, which is a folktale from Echigo [part of present-day Niigata prefecture]. The reason probably is that Kinoshita's Yuzuru shifts the emphasis from the returning-the-favor theme, to one of tragedy triggered by the husband Yohyou (the crane Tsu's husband), who became lured by money. This stresses the sadness of human beings who, while loving one another, cannot but end in catastrophe due to money. Probably what is intended is a roundabout sarcasm toward capitalist society.*

At that point, on June 16, 1981, the *Asahi Shimbun* carried an article titled "Ideologically Biased?" A chorus of protest came from people who learned of the situation and textbook publishers announced the cancellation of plans to replace it. The *Asahi* reported on the 28th of the same month, "Folktales Remained." We hand down this story as an example in which journalism played its proper role.

This story has a sequel. Early this year, Koizumi Junichiro, then Prime Minister, visited Mongolia on August 10. He presented two representative folk tale books as a gift. When the Prime Minister of Mongolia visited Japan in March, he was told that a Mongolian story called Sukh's White Horse is used as teaching material in Japanese language textbooks. The Mongolian Prime Minister requested that Koizumi choose a Japanese folk tale to include in a Mongolian textbook. Koizumi chose two items as most Japan-like. They were *Tsuru no Ongaishi* (The Crane Returns a Favor) [the original source of *Yuzuru*] and *Kasa Jizo* (Hatted Jizo) about six stone jizo who bring gifts in return for the kindness of covering their heads against the snow.



## Jizo

*Note: The story of Kasa Jizo is about a grandfather and grandmother. It is New Year's Eve. A weaver, the grandfather goes to town to sell his hats to earn money to buy food for the holiday. But as he sits by the roadside, no one buys his hats. Finally he gives up and heads for home. It is snowing. Seeing six stone jizo, hatless and cold, he gives each a hat. When he returns home and explains, the grandmother says, You have done a good thing. We'll just have ochazuke (rice soup) tonight. At dawn they hear sounds. The jizo have come to return the favor. New Year's gifts are piled up by their door.*

Both tales were branded ideologically biased by the *Jiyu Shimpo* in the 1980s . . . for their emphasis on poverty and implicit criticism of capitalist society. But no report on this occasion pointed that out.

At precisely this moment, in article two of a draft revision of the Education Law, which is the focus of the present Diet session, as many as twenty items of morality (*dotoku*) are listed one after another, even more than in the Meiji Education Rescript of 1890 (*Kyoiku Chokugo*). At the same time, contemporary opinion is sharply divided over the interpretation of many of the themes enumerated: love of country and homeland, morality, initiative (*jishu*), self-control and public spirit (*kokyo*), and equality between men and women.

Despite that, when this draft is passed at the Diet, at the actual site of education, it is clear that teachers will be forced to teach the government interpretation of these themes as the only interpretation. That itself is a large issue as demonstrated by repeated punishment imposed on

teachers by the Tokyo Education Committee following the establishment of the National Flag and Anthem Law. Thus it is natural that court case after court case, and protest after protest are occurring in the wake of the proposal for a new law.

However, just then, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro light-heartedly reversed the view of "one-sidedness" and "ideological bias" previously maintained by the ruling party, transforming the two into the "most Japanese" of stories, precisely the opposite of the charges levied against them. If frivolous slander and criticism or unstinting praise by those in power are to provide the standard, then society will be in turmoil. That is contrary to education, which should be open and just.



If you think about the sentiment of Kinoshita, whose *Yuzuru* was slandered, pointing out the injustice of that slander would have been the best way to commemorate him. Again, if the story were handled as something that proves the injustice of the proposed education law and directives from the Tokyo Education Committee, then Kinoshita would have been even more pleased. Yet not a single newspaper referred to these points. This is indeed regrettable. I would like to say to Kinoshita afresh that we will hand down the story.

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